



Air freight gets tighter screening ; Business cargo on single-aisle passenger planes now checked for explosives

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Correction ran 11/11/2008: A story Friday on checking air cargo for explosives incorrectly stated that cargo on wide-body planes, such as 747s, is not screened for bombs. A portion of business cargo on those planes is screened.

WASHINGTON -- For the first time, business cargo carried on most passenger planes is being checked for explosives, according to airlines and the Transportation Security Administration.

Airlines began checking air freight on single-aisle airplanes such as 737s and 757s as of Oct. 1, the TSA said. Air freight often includes products sent from manufacturing plants to stores and is carried on planes along with passenger luggage.

Cargo carried on wide-body planes such as 747s is still not checked for bombs but will be by early 2010, the TSA said.

"This is a very significant step for security," TSA spokesman Christopher White said. Single-aisle planes account for more than 90% of domestic flights, he said, though they hold only 25% of the cargo carried by passenger planes.

The TSA has been under pressure for several years to do a better job ensuring that there are no bombs hidden in the 250 million freight packages that passenger planes carry each year. Freight includes anything from flowers and fish to computers and auto parts that require quick delivery.

Most air freight is carried on cargo-only planes, but passenger planes also carry it. On some passenger flights, such cargo fills half the luggage hold.

Cargo groups hailed the progress made in screening.

"The American flying public should be happy and secure in the knowledge that every package that goes on narrow-body flights is screened," said Brandon Fried, executive director of the **Airforwarders Association**, a trade group of companies that help transport cargo.

Airlines are doing most of the screening at the 80 large and midsized airports using machines that detect residue from explosives, said David Castelveter of the Air Transport Association, an airline trade group.

At more than 370 small airports, the checks are done by TSA screeners who run cargo packages through the same bomb-detection machines that scan luggage, White said.

Cargo transported on single-aisle planes is easy to screen because it comes in small packages that fit through bomb-detection machines, said Steve Alterman, president of the Cargo Airline Association.

Cargo on wide-body jets is harder to screen because it is packed in 5-foot-by-5-foot metal containers. The TSA has until February 2010 to fully screen that cargo and meet a congressional deadline. The TSA plans to have some screening done by manufacturers as they pack shipments such as computers or air conditioners into boxes for air shipment.